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TRAVELLING IN COMFORT: The Role of Confidence in the Journey of Learning

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Abstract

The key objectives and targets of the Learning and Skills Council's (LSC,2001) corporate plan concerned with increasing participation in education, enhancing workforce training and raising the achievement of young people and adults are all dependent upon breaking down the barriers and obstacles which stand in the way of facilitating meaningful learning and progression. However, even after the well-documented 'situational; and 'institutional' barriers have been overcome, what McGivney (1993) calls the 'dispositional' obstacles – linked to learners' attitudes, perceptions and motivations – still need to be addressed by tutors and mentors. A crucial aspect of such dispositions is the learner's confidence and its role as an inhibitor or facilitator of learning. Although widely used – most recently in the DfES (2002) publicity about adult literacy gains – the concept of 'confidence' is, in the main, little understood and tends to be used imprecisely and rhetorically. This paper will seek – through the examination of a range of studies involving confidence and cognate concepts, in addition to original research on students learning to teach in the post-school sector – to offer some suggestions for enhancing the management and support of learning in this important sphere of work.

Introduction

The twin pillars supporting contemporary lifelong learning policy and practice are the development of vocational skills for economic competitiveness and the fostering of social inclusion and cohesion. Clear and direct links are made between inclusion and economic prosperity in the 'vision of a society where high skills, high rewards and access to education and training are open to everyone' (DfEE,2001a,p.6). Widening participation and expanding access to post-compulsory education and training (PCET) – especially for traditionally non-participating groups – has been a policy initiative for the last few decades, though only became a central plank in government policy with the publication of *The Learning Age* (DfEE,1998). The document called for a 'quiet and sustained revolution in aspiration and achievement' with the government's role defined as helping:

to create a framework of opportunities for people to learn and to lift barriers that prevent them from taking up those opportunities
(ibid.,p.13).

Such policy was a robust endorsement of the Kennedy (1997) report's assertion that

'there exists an immense and diverse body of people in this country which should be encouraged and welcomed into post-16 learning' and that 'participation must be widened not simply increased' (p.22).

The aim of widening, not just increasing, participation requires the solution of a host of perennial problems concerned with removing barriers and obstacles for those learners who have been consistently under-represented in the PCET sector. In the 1997 National Adult Learning Survey (Beinart & Smith,1997,p.11), the four most significant predictors of a person's non-vocational learning status were reported as:

- socio-economic group;
- whether or not a qualification had been obtained on leaving continuous full-time education;
- sex;
- current activity status.

These key features of non-participants have been replicated in many other studies of post-school learning (Brookfield,1986; Munn & McDonald, 1988; Thomas,2001) and investigated in depth by McGivney (1993, 1996). Characteristics which distinguish non-participants from participants in post-school learning are age (older people are less likely to be involved), educational background (the people with least initial schooling are more likely to be non-participants), and socio-economic group (the lower the social group or class, the lower the participation rate).

In addition, these features have been linked by McGivney (1993,pp.17-22) with the major obstacles and key barriers to learning summarised as:

- Situational: time available for attendance, cost of courses
- Institutional: a system unresponsive to the needs of adult learners in terms of teaching/learning strategies, timetabling and admissions to courses; also a lack of adequate information and publicity about learning opportunities
- Dispositional: problems of attitude, negative perceptions of learning, expectations and motivations linked to the key features of non-participant individuals and groups.

Moreover, work on lifelong learning 'trajectories' undertaken for the *Learning Society* project (Rees, et al, 2000) has demonstrated the power of these factors in determining, fairly precisely, individual learning identities and biographies. In their study of young people and adults living in the South Wales coal-mining regions, the researchers reported that:

those characteristics which are set very early in an individual's life, such as age, gender and family background, predict later lifelong learning trajectories with 75% accuracy. Adding the variables representing initial schooling increases the accuracy of prediction to 86%. And this rises to 89% and 90% respectively, as the variables associated with adult life and

with respondents' present circumstances are included (p.182).

This bleakly pessimistic picture, however, needs to be tempered by the impact of lifelong learning policies on post-school learning over the last few years. The expansion of learning in the further education (FE) colleges in particular – seen by the government to be 'at the heart of the revival of learning that we are witnessing in this country' (DfEE, 2000,para.95) – has been dramatic. As Smithers & Robinson (2000) put it, FE colleges currently:

provide for nearly 4 million students compared with 2.9 million when the sector was born. With the inclusion of the sixth-form colleges the sector now has more A-level students than the schools...[and] continues to be the main provider for adults with 15% growth over five years...the colleges now have more degree students than did the universities at the time of the landmark Robbins Report in 1963 (p.3).

In addition, *Learndirect* centres have enrolled around 360,000 adult on courses over the last two years (DfES,2002), the New Deal for Young People has helped 285,000 young people into work and training (DfES,2001b), and participation in higher education is continuing to expand. It could be argued that the increased flexibility of FE institutions – combined with schemes designed to help the most disadvantaged learners – has helped to overcome some of the situational and institutional barriers, thus contributing to achievement of some significant social inclusion objectives in PCET (Hyland & Merrill, 2001).

However, the evidence also indicates that this expansion of participation has not been fully matched by widening access for those groups who have been most disadvantaged in terms of post-school learning opportunities. The 'dispositional' barriers faced by people from social backgrounds where learning is undervalued continue to discourage participation, and the age at which people leave school is still a crucial variable. For those who leave at 16, 28% engage in further learning beyond school, compared with 53% for those leaving at 17 or 18, and 61% for those who stay in the system until the age of 21 (Hillage, et al, 2000,p.55). All such factors go some way to explaining why – after two decades of access activity and initiatives sponsored by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, in addition to the last five years of intensive work under the lifelong learning banner – numbers of adult learners are either static or, in some cases, actually declining.

Although there was a rapid expansion of 16-19 and adult learners in the FE sector up until 1997/98, in the last six years numbers in both groups have declined and there has also been a dip from 29% to 23% in general adult participation in PCET (Crequer,2002). More worryingly for social inclusion objectives, a recent

NIACE report indicated that the 'learning divide' is still with us, with 60% of adults in professional and managerial groups involved in learning compared with only 25% in the poorest groups which include unskilled and retired people (Aldridge & Tuckett, 2002). Moreover, drop-out rates for post school programmes are still high at around 18% with many institutions having achievement rates for qualifications below 50%, statistics which provoked the policy statement that 'greater improvements must be made if the government is to achieve national learning targets' (FEFC, 2001, p.1).

Although these persistent factors have resulted in a recent spate of policy legislation - the re-organisation of 14-19 education, special initiatives for FE colleges and a massive drive to solve basic skills problems – there is a growing recognition that real and lasting solutions can only be achieved by tackling the 'dispositional' barriers through enhancing the quality of learning support and guidance. In this sphere, a factor often cited is the anxiety, low self-esteem and general lack of confidence of many adults from traditional non-participant backgrounds on returning to learning (Kennedy, 1997; Thomson, 2001). Indeed, this 'lack of confidence' (DFES, 2002, p.1) on the part of large numbers of adults was cited specifically in recent policy documents concerned with the drive to improve basic skills. It is, without doubt, a crucial factor in learning – at all levels, not just in relation to basic skills – but discussions of the role of confidence are often conceptually imprecise, psychologically naïve and, consequently, of little practical use to teachers and lecturers in the PCET sector. We would suggest that a closer investigation of the empirical studies in this sphere can make a significant contribution to the achievement of key lifelong learning objectives in relation to widening the participation of disadvantaged individuals and groups.

Confidence: concepts and research

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines 'confidence' as the 'mental attitude of trusting in or relying on; firm trust, reliance, faith.... assured expectation ..assurance arising from reliance (on oneself, circumstances, etc.)'. In the literature on the topic, confidence has been defined as a trait (Bernstein et al, 1994; McKinney, 1960) and as a situationally specific concept (Brodie, Reeve & Whittaker, 1995; Champion, 1993). A trait is relatively stable over time, hence if confidence is a trait and not situationally specific it would mean that those who lack confidence would remain lacking in confidence and there would be little educators or educational programmes could do to increase learners' confidence. However, if confidence is situationally-specific, it means that it can be raised and lowered depending on circumstances.

Mainstream research perspectives in the conceptual field include the notions that confidence is “assuredness in oneself and in one’s capabilities” (Erwin & Kelly, 1985, p.395). It has also been characterised as an emotion, for example, in the context of nursing, it has been referred to by Barsevick & Johnson (1990) as a “positive emotional response” (p.1), in relation to social interaction it has been defined by Manning & Ray (1993) as “calmness and assertiveness during social interaction” (p.180), and Folkman & Lazarus (1985) categorised “confident” as a “challenge emotion” (p.154). Manning & Ray (1993) have also viewed confidence as being the opposite of shyness and as situational. Some writers have referred to self-efficacy as confidence (Wanberg, Watt & Rumsey, 1996) whereas, Bandura who was the originator of the term “self-efficacy” wrote in 1997, that confidence and self-efficacy are not the same. Confidence has been thought to be part of self-esteem or to be synonymous with the concept of self-esteem (Wells & Marwell, 1976), whereas Coopersmith (1967) argued that self-confidence was a term used to describe the “subjective state” of self-esteem and reported that “an individual who expresses negative attitudes towards himself thereby indicates that he has little confidence in his abilities to deal effectively with the events that confront him.” Lawrence (1999) defined self-esteem as confidence writing “confidence is self-esteem in practice and has two aspects: (i) confidence in abilities (ii) confidence in personality”. (p.92). Owens (1993) viewed self-esteem as being comprised of general self-confidence and general self-deprecation; he explained general self-confidence in terms of positive self-evaluation.

Issues of Confidence: case studies of post-school student teachers

In research in this field undertaken at Bolton Institute between 1995 and 1997, participants were student teachers learning to teach in the general PCET sector. The studies sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are student teachers referring to when they talk about their “confidence” and what do they perceive as the impact of confidence on their well-being and involvement in the learning process?
2. What do student teachers perceive as the reasons for their lack of confidence?
3. What do student teachers perceive as the factors increasing their confidence?

Views on the meaning of confidence were investigated through a “word substitution exercise” in which eleven student teachers wrote sentences about their transition to teaching. In the sentences they were to use the words “confident” and “confidence”, and then substitute other words for these whilst retaining the same meaning in the sentences. In a second study 19 student teachers provided answers to the question “What is confidence?” and in a third study – a sentence completion exercise – 27 student teachers completed the sentence “Confidence for a teacher means ...”. Each study was completed by a different group of student teachers. Participants volunteered to take part in the research and were assured of confidentiality; the word-substitution exercise was completed anonymously.

The student teachers’ perceptions of the effects of their lack of confidence, the effects of their increased confidence, reasons for their lack of confidence, and factors increasing their confidence were obtained by student teachers completing a questionnaire with closed questions. 43 student teachers from a total population of 60 completed the questionnaire. The items for the questionnaire were drawn from the findings of qualitative studies previously conducted. Participants volunteered to take part in the research and were assured of confidentiality; they completed the quantitative questionnaire anonymously. Student teachers rated possible causes of their lack of confidence as being “never”, “seldom”, “frequently” or “always” as a cause. Participants reported the extent of possible effects of increased confidence by identifying whether the possible effect was experienced “not at all”, “a little”, “quite a lot” or “a lot”. Finally the factors increasing the student teachers’ confidence were investigated. Student teachers were asked the extent to which potential confidence builders helped to increased their confidence; possible responses were “not at all”, “a little”, “quite a lot” or “a lot”.

Key findings are summarised below in terms of the three main research questions:

1) The results of the three studies investigating the meaning of confidence revealed that for student teachers confidence has a variety of meanings. To the student teachers, confidence had cognitive, emotional (affective), and performance components. In the word substitution exercise participants substituted the words “know” and “convinced” to mean confidence. In response to the question “What is confidence” student teachers answered: “”, “belief in one’s knowledge and ability”, “the belief that others believe in you”, “certainty”, “feeling sure about what you are

doing and why and thinking that it is the correct thing to do”, and “knowing that you are doing the best you possibly can”. In the sentence completion exercise participants completed the sentence “Confidence for a teacher means ...” with “knowing your strengths and weaknesses” and “knowledge”. These are examples of the cognitive component of confidence.

The emotional or affective component was evident in the word substitution exercise when student teachers used the words “comfortable”, “happy”, “self-assured”, and “assured” to mean confidence. The affective component was also evident in answers to the question “What is confidence?”. In answer to this they wrote: “being able to relax”, “being happy with materials”, “not being frightened in a situation”, and “lack of fear”. The sentence completion exercise reinforced confidence being seen as having an emotional component; student teachers completed the sentence with phrases such as: “relaxed”, “being able to address a class warmly without fear or anxiety”.

The performance component was expressed in the word substitution exercise when student teachers substituted “able”, “effective”, “competent” and “composed” for confident. The performance component was also illustrated in student teachers’ answers to the question “What is confidence?” when they replied that confidence is the “ability to overcome nerves”, “the ability to negotiate tasks”, “ability to produce results in an unfamiliar or stressful situation and under pressure”, and “ability to stand up in front of students and deliver experiences with pride and conviction”. Student teachers completed the sentence “Confidence for a teacher means ...” with: “delivering lessons well”, “being well prepared”, “able to help students to progress”, “able to motivate students”, “being able to do the job well”, “planning skills”, “good handwriting”, “good time control”, “being able to instil a desire to learn in students”, and “ability to cope with the teaching environment”.

Participants perceived confidence to have an impact on their well-being and involvement in the learning process. Their lack of confidence made student teachers self-critical and doubtful of their own abilities; anxious, nervous, tense, uncomfortable and insecure; they had difficulty communicating with and interacting with others; and they avoided certain tasks. Increasing confidence on the other hand had facilitative effects. Growing confidence allowed them to adapt to new situations quicker, take on more responsibility, engage more fully in the learning process, enjoy learning, be

more relaxed, be more motivated, and interact more easily with others. Thus, with confidence student teachers could travel on their learning journey in greater comfort.

2) Causes of lack of confidence formed the following themes:

Newness of the task – causes focused on the newness and strangeness of the task of teaching;

Identity – student teachers thought they did not look like teachers and did not feel like teachers;

Overestimating task requirements – they lacked understanding of the teacher's role, thought they had to know everything (they thought students would perceive them as fountains of knowledge), and expected too much from students;

Self-doubt – they doubted their own worth and ability and were operating outside their own comfort zone;

Own physical characteristics – own age and appearance;

Fear of not being accepted by others – they thought they would not be accepted by colleagues and students in the teaching placement college, and by their tutors and peers on the initial teacher training (ITT) course;

Feeling of inferiority and perceived knowledge deficit – they thought their peers on the ITT course were better and more intelligent than themselves, and that teaching placement colleagues were better than themselves. They thought they were not clever enough to be teachers and were aware of what they perceived to be their knowledge deficits;

Negative thinking – they thought peers and colleagues would have a negative perception of them, and they were unsure if their students liked them;

Feeling scared – they were scared and lacked courage;

Being judged – they lacked experience, were being judged by others and were nervous;

Uncertainty of being successful on the ITT course – they were unsure if they would be successful on the ITT course and were unsure if they were liked by their peers on the course.

3) Factors increasing student teachers' confidence formed the following themes:

Learning, experiencing and achieving – this focused on student teachers learning and utilising relevant skills and knowledge, having successful accomplishments as they undertook tasks, being given responsibility and gaining experience of the job of

teaching. It also included practising and discovering new teaching techniques, establishing a positive rapport with own students, receiving feedback from own students and ITT tutors, and being able to discuss fears and problems with peers and ITT tutors;

Feeling secure and receiving positive feedback – they felt more secure as the ITT course progressed and as they received positive feedback on their performance;

Realism – accepting they don't have to know everything and being expected to give presentations to groups;

Social interaction – interacting with others to obtain help, having discussions, asking questions and networking;

Familiarity and receiving support and encouragement – gaining experience in implementing own lessons, receiving support and encouragement and being familiar with lesson materials;

Relaxation and reassurance – student teachers learned to relax and enjoy what they were doing, they learned that nervousness was not unusual, they used lesson notes, and realised that students tended not to ask difficult questions. They used self-talk, settled into the placement and felt they were in control.

Self-management - they were able to analyse what they were not confident in and how to become more confident, and engaged in action planning and goal setting;

Working with staff at the teaching practice placement– they assisted other teachers with lessons and worked as a member of a team;

Coping with a lot of work and receiving criticism – they coped with a lot of work and received criticism which helped them improve their teaching performance;

Being treated well – they were treated well by the ITT tutors, they had access to the mentoring process at the teaching practice placement, they attended tutorials with ITT tutors and received feedback on their progress.

Discussion

Although the participants in our research on confidence were involved in specialised learning, a number of factors point to implications and lessons for adult learning in general. The first general point to make is that, if the participants in the Bolton study – people, in the main, with post-school qualifications, work experience and knowledge of the education system – experienced such difficulties with confidence in returning to learn, then, for those returners without such advantages, the problems are magnified. Given all this, it is essential to attend to such dispositional factors in addition to the situational and institutional barriers to learning.

On the basis of our research, we would highlight the following as key issues to attend to in organising learning support - whether this is on basic skills, access or professional programmes – in the PCET sector:

Lack of confidence as a barrier to learning

In this paper, the authors have presented findings that, arguably, are applicable to PCET learning in general. However, there were some findings which were specific to the student teachers' situations which might not be universally applicable to other learners. This, coupled with the variety of meanings student teachers attributed to "confidence", suggests that, although some aspects of confidence are generalisable, there is a need for research to uncover learners' confidence/lack of confidence in specific situations – for example, in basic skills, work-based learning and access to higher education programmes – in order to develop ways to overcome the barriers which learners' lack of confidence can create.

Social Learning

The importance of social interaction as a factor in increasing confidence was emphasised by participants, and there is much support in general learning theory for the notion that – as Harkin, Turner & Dawn (2001) put it – 'effective learning is facilitated by social interaction' and that learning 'has its basis in the relationships which exist between people' (pp.52-3). This will be of special importance in the basic skills sphere where – particularly in ICT strategies criticised by Guile & Hayton (1999) in which solitary learning/teaching often predominates – achievement and progression are hampered by the failure to see 'learning as part of a social practice' (Lave & Wenger, 2002, p.122). The message is clear : group activity and interaction has the potential to enhance confidence and achievement at all levels of learning.

Learning Support and Co-ordination

The role of ensuring continuity between all forms of learning – formal and informal – and across different settings emerged as a key factor in increasing confidence in the study, and connects with similar findings by Bloomer & Hodkinson (2002) in their stress on 'studentship' and 'learning careers'. They argue that the attention to a student's disposition towards learning over time can serve to integrate:

both formal and informal learning from a wide range of learning situations and contexts. It offers insights into how learners continually select, adapt, create and utilize learning opportunities under hugely diverse conditions, in response to their needs as they experience them (ibid., p.41).

Such notions of continuity will be of particular significance for tutors and mentors on the vast range of PCET programmes which include a work-based element, in

addition to those working on general vocational courses in which support for basic and key skills forms an important component.

The research indicated that although the individual learner can affect his/her own level of confidence, tutors, peers, mentors and workplace supervisors can help increase the learner's confidence by providing support, encouragement, and constructive feedback. Such learning support needs to unpack meanings of confidence in task-specific contexts in order to overcome particular dispositional barriers.

Conclusion

In order to achieve the key LSC objectives of 'raising the participation and achievement of young people' and increasing the 'demand for learning by adults' (LSC,2001), it is vital that the dispositional barriers to participation and progress are given due attention and, in this respect, the DfES emphasis on the importance of confidence as a factor in adult learning is to be welcomed. In spite of the spate of activity aimed at widening participation since the 1997 Kennedy Report, Reisenberger (2002) reminds us that the 'social profile of learners has not changed significantly' that 'adult learning participation is fairly static' and that there 'are still 100,000 young people who remain robustly immune to participating in post-compulsory learning'(p.8). We would argue that – although there are still situational and institutional barriers to be overcome – more attention needs to be directed towards dispositional barriers, particularly factors linked to learners' confidence. The general findings of our study of learning by PCET student teachers are intended to be elements of a first sketch of what will necessarily be a much larger and more finished picture of illustrating ways of enhancing the confidence, achievement and progression of post-school learners.

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